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ABSTRACT

Community college students tend to perceive a gap between their current writing ability and the level of writing skill they expect to need as employees in the future. Unfortunately, college composition classes generally do a poor job of capitalizing on the true value of writing to career development, and fail to have students practice the kind of writing which will contribute directly to that development. In light of these curricular deficiencies, composition instructors should take pains to acknowledge to their students that there are good reasons, beyond the need for satisfactory grades in school, to write well. They should also provide students with an opportunity to discover and enjoy some of the benefits of good writing. The "Future-Perfect Writing" process addresses both of these goals. This process involves the following steps: (1) each student identifies a career field in which he/she has a strong personal interest; (2) within the chosen field, the student seeks two job-holders whose positions are similar to ones that the student would like to fill someday; (3) the student negotiates with the two designated community assessors to establish a writing task which approximates a real on-the-job responsibility; (4) when the student has completed the writing task to the satisfaction of the community assessors, the assessors sign a statement confirming that judgment; and (5) each student presents an oral account of his/her experiences and discoveries involved in the "future-perfect writing" project. This process reinforces students' understanding of how writing can be of value in their future careers, and provides individualized writing practice that can contribute to future career success. (EJV)

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Future-Perfect Writing: Individualized Real-World Writing to Empower Career-Conscious Students

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Future-Perfect Writing: Individualized Real-World Writing to Empower Career-Conscious Students

Rationale

In a written survey administered to my introductory community college English composition class the first day of this semester, I asked the 28 students to respond to three statements: "A person must write well to succeed at most jobs," "My future career will demand a lot of writing," and "I write as well today as my future career will require." Replies to the first two statements were overwhelmingly positive, whereas answers to the last sentence came out strongly negative.

My students apparently recognized at least one compelling personal reason for learning to write better: a perceived gap between their current writing ability and the level of writing skill they expect to need as employees in the future. Enrolling in an English composition class, it would seem, was just what my students needed to do.

Consider, though, how English instructors in higher educational institutions customarily regard their introductory composition curriculum. Most of the assignments given in composition classes call upon students to write in accordance with models whose relationship to anything beyond the boundaries of academe is dubious. (Do employers in the real world ever ask their subordinates to write "comparison-contrast essays" or praise an employee for placing topic sentences in just the right part of a paragraph?)

As the results of my survey suggest, students are aware that

writing will be important to them later in life. The problem, however, is that college composition classes generally do a poor job of two things: capitalizing on the true value of writing to people's career development, and having students practice writing which will contribute directly to that development. Realistic incentives for writing--real problems to solve, real audiences to communicate with, and real rewards for quality products--are generally missing in these classes.

In light of the curricular deficiencies I have just described, I propose that freshman college composition instructors take pains to incorporate two new elements into their teaching of the subject. First, instructors should acknowledge to their students the fact that there are good reasons, beyond the need to get satisfactory grades in school, to write well. Although students already recognize these reasons, instructors seldom exhibit a parallel appreciation.

Second, instructors should provide students an opportunity independently to discover and begin to enjoy some of the authentic long-term benefits of good writing. I believe that what I call "future-perfect writing projects" can be an effective tool in both these efforts.

The "Future-Perfect Writing" Process

In teaching composition in a community college setting, I have asked my students to follow a specific sequence in their "future-perfect writing" projects. As I have structured it, this sequence includes the following steps:

1. Each student identifies a career field in which he or she has acquired a strong personal interest through direct past experience or some other impetus.

2. Within the chosen field, the student seeks out two job-holders whose positions are similar to ones which the student feels he or she would like to fill some day. (These two persons are referred to as "community assessors.")

3. The student negotiates with the two designated community assessors to establish a writing task for the student to fulfill which approximates--or is identical to--a real responsibility assumed by people who hold the job the student has selected.

4. When the student has completed the writing task to the satisfaction of the community assessors, the assessors sign a statement confirming that judgment.

5. Each student presents an oral account to the rest of the class of experiences and discoveries involved in having conducted the "future-perfect writing" project.

Examples

Let me illustrate the nature of the future-perfect writing process with a few samples culled from my own students' work. One man who intends to work toward a career in transportation management submitted the following statement, signed by a traffic manager in a local trucking firm:

> If [student's name] were to work for me and/or be my assistant, I would have him write a paper on how to secure new business [and] write proposals/letters to prospective customers, detailing the services our company offers and the type of equipment we have to service their account.

In this student's future-perfect writing for the semester, thus, he will perform writing which mirrors "compositions" actually executed by workers in his chosen career area.

Other writing tasks selected by students in conjunction with community assessors this semester include an overview, including overhead transparencies and slides, of the Central Parts Division of a forklift manufacturing firm; a log of transit times for air and container freight shipments between a suburban Chicago spice retailer and its South American affiliates; and a set of charts covering a hospital patient's daily progress. Obviously, the number and nature of topics for future-perfect writing are limited only by the bounds of students' inventiveness and pluck.

Intended and Incidental Benefits of the Process

I believe that two primary benefits should accrue to students if they properly fulfill the requirements of future-perfect writing. First, the process reinforces students' understanding of how writing can be of value in their future careers. Second, the process provides each student with individualized writing practice which can contribute directly to his or her ability to succeed at work later life.

A number of further positive outcomes may arise, however, beyond the two for which I originally inaugurated the practice of future-perfect writing. I have already seen, for one thing, that having to select a community assessor for their projects represents an educationally worthwhile challenge for most of my students.

First of all, some students confront the fact that they aren't really sure *where* they would like to work in the future. This realization may nudge them toward more serious career planning than they have engaged in previously. One of my students this semester, for instance, has enrolled in a career seminar elsewhere on campus partly as an outgrowth of such an encounter with his own indecision.

Second, the future-perfect writing process allows students latitude to experiment with career areas other than those in which they have announced to their friends or previous instructors that they are interested. One woman who took advantage of such latitude this semester, for example, wrote

> Even though I told you I was going into hotel management, the idea of going into education keeps running through my head... I would like to do my future perfect writing in education... I'll be able to attend some classes, work on lesson plans, [write] reports on students, and check the students' work.

Once they have decided upon a career area in which to locate their assessors, students are apt to face an obstacle reflected in a plaintive question posed to me earlier this year: "What if I've never *talked* to a physician before?" Students must, they find, actually initiate contact with strangers who are apt to be extremely busy, considerably older than themselves, and--without doubt--new to being asked for assistance of this sort by someone outside their fields. For students to make this contact successfully, in as poised and coherent a fashion as possible, requires a degree of planning and willpower many of them are unaccustomed to exercising.

Some of my most creative and gutsy students have inferred that their choice of community assessors may even act as a possible entree into an actual job. Although these students may be unfamiliar with the idea of using informational interviewing as one component of an effective job search strategy, they are quite capable of concluding that the average employer is likely to be impressed by someone who demonstrates sufficient interest in a trade to volunteer time to assist with it. If they work things right, these students understand, they can present their composition assignment as a beneficent service they pledge to perform *for* a potential employer rather than as a favor they have to ask *from* such an individual.

One last incidental benefit to students who participate in a future-perfect writing project is that they gain a power and an opportunity which are rarely conferred upon students in composition courses. They are accorded the power to determine the nature of one of their own learning experiences according to their unique career goals, and they enjoy the opportunity to meet or exceed standards of writing quality which have been set by authorities whose judgment is as legitimate--or more legitimate--than a classroom instructor's.

Finally, I suspect that future-perfect writing assignments used over a period of years can generate benefits which transcend any particular classroom. As they

demonstrate through future-perfect writing that they are capable of initiating mutually helpful relationships with leaders of firms in the surrounding community, students may strengthen those leaders' appreciation for what an educational institution can do for them. Favorable impressions of this sort, though perhaps fleeting and casual at the time they take form, might very well later translate into tangible support for such significant institutional ventures as bond referenda or scholarship campaigns.

Conclusion

The comments I have made here about future-perfect writing are derived from my own philosophy of education, which has evolved over the last 20 years, and supported by results of preliminary experimentation with a small sample of community college students. Because it is a new and unorthodox technique whose current formulation is apt to contain some flaws, future-perfect writing will need to be refined in response to questions and special needs posed by my own students and others'.

In any event, no single technique employed in a composition classroom can enable an instructor to accomplish all the goals he or she sets for students in that classroom. Instead, a blend of approaches is necessary. Given this need for diversity, I believe future-perfect writing is one promising way to empower today's career-conscious students to improve their writing by linking their inner resources with the plans they entertain for the future.

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